

Region 7 Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC)
Winter Meeting
January 15, 2020 – Region 7 HQ

FWP Staff Present: Brad Schmitz, Mike Backes, Erin O'Connor, Marla Prell, Jack Austin, John Ensign, Frank Blundetto, Zach Phillips, Tom Shoush and Vanessa Zeitner

CAC Members Present: Bob Hagedorn, Ed Joiner, Bob Gilbert, Ed Bukoskey, Dale Kreiman, George Luther and Glenn Heitz

Guests Present: Dee Gilbert, Glenda Kreiman and Sally Hagedorn

Brad began the meeting by welcoming everyone and asked attendees to introduce themselves.

Parks Update

Tom Shoush, Manager for Hell Creek State Park, provided a regional Parks update. Region 7 is reestablishing itself as a region in the State Parks system. There are 55 state parks in Montana, seven of which are registered as National Historic Landmarks. He noted that Region 7 has a great mix of historical, cultural, natural and recreational parks. Region 7 has six state parks and manages Brush Lake in Region 6.

State Parks is funded through several different mechanisms. These consist of earned revenue such as vehicle registration and park user fees, merchandise sales, license dollars, an accommodation tax, a motorboat and fuel decal, coal tax and federal dollars. Senate Bill 24, which passed in the 2019 Session, increased the vehicle registration fee from \$6 to \$9. From that fee, \$6.74 goes to State Parks, \$.50 to the Fishing Access Site program, \$1.37 to the Community Trails Grant Program, and \$.39 to Virginia City and Nevada City. There is an option to opt-out of paying this fee but average participation is about 83%.

Visitation to state parks is steadily increasing from both residents and nonresidents. Makoshika has the highest visitation in Region 7, followed by Tongue River Reservoir.

Some of our parks recently completed varying improvement projects. Hell Creek had a substantial water and sewer system upgrade as well as road improvements. Makoshika had an upgrade to the fire suppression system and repairs to the elevator in the visitor center and installed a water line to the campground. Rosebud Battlefield installed a traffic turnaround to improve traffic flow, did some repairs to a staff residence and upgraded a fuel system.

AmeriCorps is a unique program that State Parks has developed a great partnership with. AmeriCorps is a natural service program where college students can go into the workforce, get experience relevant to their degree, and get education compensation for their term of service. This brings a very diverse field staff to our parks as the students are from a wide array of education programs. These students allow us to tap into their experiences and energy and provide programming in the parks that we otherwise may not be able to do.

State Parks offers numerous grant programs including the recreational trails program and a snowmobile and OHV grant program.

Other things happening in Montana State Parks include an update to Parks' strategic plan and an update to the statewide comprehensive outdoor recreational plan, or SCORP, which is a requirement to qualify for Land & Water Conservation Fund dollars. Parks also recently went through a classification and investment policy update where they revisited their future and visioning for State Parks. We have

strong leadership right now who is committed to looking at Montana State Parks being more formally included under the umbrella of FWP.

The Parks & Rec Board is similar to the Fish & Wildlife Commission and is comprised of five members who bring some great different perspectives to the table.

Ed B. inquired about private commercial events at Makoshika and if the park gets some funding from that. Tom said there is a permitting process for any commercial activity in the parks, and some funding is received. For the most part, there is not a lot of commercial activity in Makoshika, though.

Bob G. asked about the proposal by the Little Shell Tribe to bid on the management of Hell Creek State Park. He is concerned about what he feels is a lack of management experience and coordination by the Tribe. He has visited with a member of the Parks Board and would like to see FWP continue management of the park. Bob has also heard that the Tribe was promised they would be able to buy 200 acres of land, but there's no information as to where or from whom, which makes him very nervous.

Tom replied that we also recognize the value of Hell Creek to Montana and the parks system. It's a complicated issue right now with the lease coming up in 2021. He thinks it's important that people are engaging and talking about it and advocating for the park. FWP is committed to maintaining the obligations of its existing lease. He is hopeful that the future of Hell Creek is going to be positive. The language from the Director's Office is that it is FWP's desire and intent to continue managing Hell Creek.

Enforcement Update

Zach Phillips, Baker district warden, provided an overview of a 2019 case he spearheaded in Carter County. Three different mule deer bucks were found with their heads cut off by the same landowner in the period of about 10 days in January 2019. Zach detailed how events unfolded, including how he tried to find evidence and piece things together. The timeline of these events was concurrent with the construction of a pipeline, and subsequent additional people, in the area. One of the deer was found around the time of a local coyote derby, which contributed to one theory Zach initially had in handling the case. Zach eventually ran into what would end up being the culprit. With the description of a possible vehicle involved and being in the right place at the right time, he was able to piece everything together. The individual who was apprehended was someone from out of state who was in the area working on the pipeline project. He was a multiple-time felon with an outstanding warrant from another state as well. He was charged with numerous citations, paid \$1900 in fines and restitution and received a 10-year privilege suspension. Zach was happy with the way the judge addressed sentencing in this case. After we were done with him, the individual was also federally indicted on being a felon in possession of a firearm.

Zach praised the coordination and efforts from other Region 7 wardens who assisted with this case. It was a definite team effort and he appreciated everyone's, including the landowner's, assistance.

Communication & Education

Marla Prell, Region 7 Information Officer, provided an update on all the various presentations, projects and activities that she was involved in last year. Comm Ed was heavily involved in messaging efforts during last year's CWD testing, particularly in the fall. Later this month, Marla will be attending a grizzly bear education and outreach summit in Helena. She's also been appointed to attend a marketing workshop in Atlanta in February. This is through an outdoor recreation association and is an all-expense paid trip. Marla is part of an outreach team to talk about ways to reach different audiences and get

FWP's story out there, so this workshop will play into that. She's also part of a Landowner Relations working group. She has two stories for Montana Outdoors are in the works.

Looking towards summer, Marla is planning to assist with the BB's & Bows in the Badlands event held in June at the Stenson ranch near Wibaux. She's hoping to try a local campfire education series as well, like what staff hold at Makoshika. Region 3 holds an outdoor festival in the fall and Marla would like to try something like that in this region as well. Folks would learn about our programs and get a better idea of what FWP does.

One thing Marla is hoping comes through this year is some funding for a Citizen Science project for swift fox research. This would allow her to be involved with taking that project out to area schools or for schools to participate in field trips to help with some aspects of the research such as den monitoring via motion cameras.

In 2019 Hunter Ed in Region 7 saw about 400 students. There are currently 72 instructors in 11 counties who taught 21 classes and put on nine field days. Bow Ed saw about 100 students in 2019. There are about 30 instructors in nine counties who offered seven classes and five field days. The Aquatic Ed program consists primarily of Kids Fishing Days held for fifth and sixth grade students across the region. These involve staff from almost every division who volunteer to assist with different aspects of the event, as well as members of different sportsman's groups in the communities. Approximately 230 volunteer hours were dedicated to these events in 2019. Last year it served 860 kids and adults in about a dozen communities across the region. Students learn about water safety, hypothermia, fish ID, how to use a rod and reel and then attempt their hand at fishing. Marla is hoping to expand and be able to bring these types of events into the classroom where we can further teach students about fish ID, anatomy and more in-depth topics.

Fisheries

Mike Backes, Region 7 Fisheries Manager, updated everyone on the latest work and future items in that division. Mike showed a map demonstrating where all the Fisheries program reaches in Region 7. In October we finished an ADA-accessible fishing pier at Rosebud East Fishing Access Site (FAS) near Forsyth. This project resulted from an individual with ties to the community who approached the Department with this idea, and partially funded it. We're currently working on revamping the dam operator contract for Gartside Reservoir, between Savage and Sidney. This is a unique FAS in that FWP owns the reservoir, but it has a DNRC-classified high-hazard dam. We have a contract with someone who lives within a 15-20-mile proximity of the dam so if the dam starts to fail, they can assist us with monitoring the dam and opening the spillway if need be. This spring we will be soliciting for anyone interested in doing that contract.

Upcoming infrastructure or capital improvement projects include replacing the severely damaged Elk Island boat ramp and rebuilding the ramp at Fallon Bridge. South Sandstone FAS will be receiving a fence around the concrete spillway to bring us in compliance with DNRC dam inspections. Intake is in the process of receiving a new well, which was put on hold this fall when inclement weather conditions set in. This project is about 80% complete and will be finished in the spring. We're also working on a potential FAS acquisition near Savage.

Region 7's prairie ponds program had a banner year in 2019. We had really good runoff last year that filled up most reservoirs. This allowed for a great opportunity for us to reestablish a fishery in many ponds. The Hatchery did 89 different stockings in 77 individual waters last year, which was markedly more than 2018. We also were able to complete 15 wild fish transfers into eight ponds. Adult-size crappie, bluegill and yellow perch that are unavailable from the Hatchery were moved from ponds that hold high concentrations of those species into ponds that didn't have any to speak of.

Another project that we were indirectly involved with was the Baker Lake project. This was a 2.5-year project to improve Baker Lake and its fishery. The depth of the lake was increased in areas of it to improve the fishery and hopefully eliminate the winterkill that was commonplace there. One additional project involved Hollecker Lake near Glendive which is undergoing a draining process to reset the fishery. This lake's water supply is the local irrigation district, but there is no way to screen out larval and fry fish, like suckers and minnows, that come from the river. Every five or six years, the lake should be drained to clean out the undesirable fish species and improve the overall quality of the desirable fish. Its been about eight years, so this lake was due to be cleaned out again.

One other minor project included repairing the spillway at Haughian bass pond which was damaged in ice-out last spring. BLM is also doing some spillway repairs to Dean S and Homestead Reservoirs.

Mike then provided a status report on the Intake project. Phase 2 started in July 2019 and involved excavating the manmade bypass channel, putting a new concrete dam across the river, and filling in the upper end of the historic channel. Our staff have been actively involved with a four-year native species telemetry project that included pallid and shovelnose sturgeon, paddlefish, sauger and blue sucker. Transmitters were implanted into fish to study how the Intake Dam and bypass channel affects those species. Once the project is done, we will do the same study to compare and make improvements if need be. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) was a partner on this project which took place during the years of litigation leading up to Phase 2. Over 600 fish had transmitters which required substantial staff time to monitor their activity.

The south half of the new concrete dam was supposed to have been built last fall. The next half is to be built this coming fall. However, after the temporary causeway was built last fall, the sheet pilings were only able to go about half the depth that they were engineered to go into the ground. After attempting other things, the contractor had to completely abandon all efforts to build the concrete dam because it couldn't be built to specification. This could lead to an extension of the project. The lower half of the side channel is basically done.

The big aspect of this two to three-year project is that Joe's Island had to be closed to the public for now. This impacts some paddlefish anglers who use that area. As a result, Mike put together a coordination plan which was given to and well-received by the BOR. Before paddlefish season starts there will be a meeting to provide an understanding of where anglers can go. Paddlefish angling the next few years could be interesting due to this project and the arrival of a certain age classification of fish coming up. Mike then detailed some pallid sturgeon movements that took place as part of this telemetry project.

Wildlife Update

John Ensign, Region 7 Wildlife Manager, gave a summary of last fall's CWD monitoring efforts, and what his division is doing in the near future. FWP has been involved in CWD survey efforts since about 2006. With increasing concern about CWD, a plan was developed that included what would happen in the event a positive was detected. Through the plan, three high-priority surveillance areas were identified, which included parts of Regions 5, 6 and 7. Region 5 was first, Region 6 was 2018 and this last year was Region 7's turn in the rotation.

Trying to be proactive, our region established a Management Zone after a positive was detected just north of Sheridan, WY. This was the area between the Powder and Tongue Rivers south of Highway 212. Basically, we said we were going to look more intensely in that area. Deer and elk harvested in that area were not able to be removed from there in their entirety. Any parts of the brain or spinal column had to be removed from carcasses.

The surveillance efforts in this region were a bit consuming in that it included work from biologists, wardens, and even front office staff. We hired eight technicians, two of which were based at the office. The rest of the techs ran check stations at Ashland, Hysham, Ekalaka and Broadus. It was also decided this year to offer free testing which created an additional workload.

Region 7 ended up with six positive animals – four whitetail (WT) deer and two mule deer (MD). Positives included a WT buck north of Hysham, a WT doe just north of the Wyoming border, a MD buck near Fort Howes, a WT buck just south of Broadus and another WT buck at Brandenburg. Where we expected to see CWD show up was in the southeast corner of the region near Alzada and Broadus. However, we had a fair number of samples from that area and didn't find anything. The real surprise came when we had a positive MD buck north of Terry near Big Sheep Mountain. Region 6 had a new positive farther south in their region in McCone County and a MD buck was found positive nine miles east of Sidney in McKenzie County, North Dakota. Also new last year was the first positive in elk that took place in Region 5 and a moose near Libby.

Sampling is on a weighted value system with the goal being 300 points per species. Bucks are valued higher than does and roadkill is valued higher than hunter-harvested animals. Region 7 did not reach those targets yet, so we'll be testing again this year. The idea is to get to 300 points which from a statistical standpoint shows us that we have a 95% confidence that CWD is present at less than 1%.

Regarding the CWD plan, John said it's a good plan but now that we've basically found CWD across the state, we're going to have to rethink some of our suppositions. One thing we're considering is moving away from Management Zones which have proved to be somewhat nonfunctioning. The plan currently says a 10-mile radius will be drawn around any new positives to attempt extensive sampling. John believes we may see some flexibility in that moving forward. Efforts are under way to start revising that plan.

Glenn asked if it's possible to speed up the sampling efforts. John explained that samples are gathered here and then sent to Colorado for testing. This leads to an approximate three-week turnaround which can be problematic. There is discussion about the possibility of an outside lab becoming available at some point in Montana that could test our samples.

Brad emphasized that hunters should start rethinking how they handle their animals, particularly in regard to processing. Individual animals should be kept separate during processing until you know tested animals have come back to be positive or negative. Additionally, hunters may not be able to transport animals the way they are customarily used to. John emphasized that if anyone, especially landowners, see a deer acting strangely they should call us.

John briefed the group on upcoming efforts to collar antelope in this region. This will be taking place in late February in areas north of Forsyth and in Garfield County, as well as near Alzada. Populations in Rosebud and Garfield Counties have struggled to rebound after a Blue Tongue outbreak in 2007 and severe winters in the subsequent couple of years. Meanwhile, populations in the southeastern corner of the region have become robust. Sixty head will be collared in each of the two areas and we will be gathering data over the next four to five years. The ultimate goal is to try to identify what is affecting antelope in the area that is struggling.

Current Hot Topics

Brad provided a brief update on current efforts to replace our license printers and the licensing system. License printers for the current system have become nonexistent and the system itself is 20 years old. There is a proposal out to rebuild the system. In the meantime, we have replaced our license printers with standard printers and will be printing licenses on regular paper. Carcass tags will be able to

be printed at home when you make those purchases online. There are some obvious challenges with this, which we are working through the nuances of.

Next, Brad informed the group on the recent Bison EIS. Last week the Director announced that we were finalizing our programmatic environmental impact statement (EIS) for the process of establishing wild bison herds in Montana. This process started about ten years ago and has been basically idle for the last several years. Director Williams has decided that we're going to finalize the process with a Record of Decision. This provides the opportunity for the concept of a free ranging wild bison herd in Montana. That said, we have not picked a specific alternative, or option, for doing so. We've left all alternatives as viable choices. How the Director has approached this is that we as a state agency are not going to move forward as the lead entity putting a bison herd on the ground. Instead we've decided instead to finalize the EIS which provides the process and sideboards to be able to do so and that is it. If an outside entity decides they wish to pursue a bison herd, the process and criteria is now defined. There currently is nothing in the works from anyone pursuing a bison herd.

CAC Roundtable Discussion

Bob H. – He attended the public meeting held in his area for the upcoming antelope survey. There was a lot of skeptical landowners who wanted nothing to do with it. Some landowners had concerns as to what would happen if we determine the antelope have some kind of disease. Others wanted to know what we would do if we determine the problem is predators. He understands that the study is going to happen but feels that it isn't universally well-thought of.

Brad recognized that there are challenges when we attempt these large-scale studies. He also acknowledged that the timing of the Bison EIS in relation to these upcoming efforts is not ideal. He asked for specifics if Bob thinks there's anything we could do better to help open up access to get collars on the antelope in his area.

Dale – He saw more antelope in his area this last year than he has seen for a while.

Brad agreed and reiterated that where we're not seeing the antelope really come back is in the Forsyth area. Usually we have a pretty good idea of what is going on when populations are struggling. Unfortunately, we're having difficulty determining what is happening this time.

George – Several years ago when a sage grouse study was taking place, he had lessees come to him and say that they didn't want the Department on their property. He reminded them that we should be there as the data that comes from these types of things is necessary and desired. The mule deer study in Wibaux and Richland Counties is a great example and people learned things that they didn't know before.

Bob G. – Noted that the feral pig issue is getting bigger all the time. There is a lot of both truth and misconceptions out there.

Brad noted that at this point there has been a couple sighting of pigs along the Saskatchewan border. Other agencies have been there immediately to try to take care of the situation, and we have worked with them where appropriate to do so. There is going to be more discussion about this in the future. Bob added that bison must go through a quarantine process, which is a lengthy process. That said, he doesn't see free-range bison ranches popping up wherever.

Conclusion

Brad concluded by saying we'll meet again for a tour this summer. He is thinking of a few ideas including a possible visit to an upland bird project area or maybe one of our state parks. Marla will keep in contact. He appreciates everyone's efforts and the good discussion.